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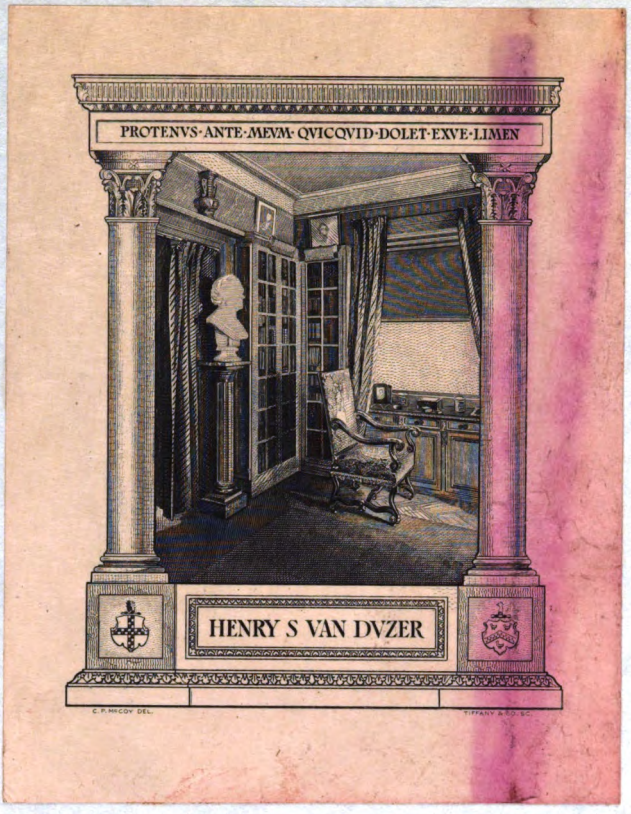

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VOL. III. No. 14.

LIPPINCOTT'S MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY, 1869.

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MR. THACKERAY.

IN attempting a brief review of the works of this eminent author, we wish to speak freely, but candidly, both of his merits and defects. Upon a subject of this kind there will, of course, be a wide difference of opinion. The maxim *De gustibus* is unlimited in its application to the immense world of novel-readers. While we trust not to infringe upon the respect due to the memory of a great man who has but recently departed, we would also claim the privilege of stating, frankly and honestly, our impression not only of his individual efforts, but of the general scope and tendency of his writings.

It is a somewhat interesting fact that the principle of development, which prevails so extensively in other departments of literature, is rarely discernible in the progress and career of writers of fiction. Where a novelist is successful at all, it is almost certain to be, if not by his first, by some one of the earliest, of his productions. To "wake up in the morning and find one's self famous" has been the good fortune not of an exceptional instance, but of the vast majority of those who have attained to distinction in this field of artistic labor. Upon this point a mere reference to a few celebrated names will be sufficient. To go back to no very remote period, what admirer of Sir Walter Scott does not turn with something of the fondness of first love to the pure and limpid pages of *Waverley?* Every subsequent novel which Madame D'Arblay wrote was a falling off from *Evelina*, in the opinion of the most competent critics. The cleverness, the sarcastic wit and brilliancy of *Pelham* attracted a degree of attention which we doubt if the sober and chastened style of *The Caxtons* would have gained for the aristocratic author, had the latter been given to the world in the spring instead of in the autumn of his versatile powers. The fame of Washington Irving in two hemispheres began with *Knickerbocker's New York*, written at an age when many young men are still plying their tasks at college. Mr. Cooper, after one unsuccessful attempt to depict the lives of lords and ladies in *Precaution*, found his legitimate sphere among the mighty rivers and forests, the stirring historic incidents and patriotic associations of his own land, and stood forth as the foremost of American descriptive writers in *The Spy*. Even those who more enjoy Mr. Dickens in his serious than in his comic moods—even readers of the gentler sex who much prefer the tender pathos and beauty of *David Copperfield* or the *Tale of Two Cities* to the rollicking drolleries of Sam Weller and Bob Sawyer—will still admit that *Pickwick*, the unapproachable and immortal, has been no more surpassed by the author himself than it is likely to be by any future claimant to rivalship in his full-blown dignities and honors.

To this general truth (which it is needless to illustrate at length) Mr. Thackeray was a singular exception. He had attained the full period of middle life, and had been employed with his pen—perhaps dependent upon it for support—for years, before his name was even known to the community at large. As no biography of him has been published which amounts to more than a mere sketch, we have little acquaintance with his private and personal history. In this long period of at least comparative obscurity, we must remain ignorant of how much there was of disappointment, of mortified self-esteem, of the chafings of genius, conscious alike of its own powers and of its inability to give them adequate expression—it may be of the struggles of poverty and the hope deferred which maketh the heart sick. Passages of this kind are the saddest in the experience of men of letters. We trace their influence in the pages of many a gifted author, where

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the promptings of a generous nature and a kindly temper are warped into a feeling either of morbid bitterness or sarcastic cynicism toward a world whose only offence has been to pronounce a judgment which the writer himself, in the fullness of years and with the calm reflection which Time engenders, would have abundantly confirmed.

To pass in review even the more important of Mr. Thackeray's earlier productions would greatly transcend our limits, and prove of little interest to the general reader. Some of them, we are told, were so far from being regarded with complacency by his own riper judgment that he was by no means complimented or pleased at their reissue in this country without his consent. There is one, however, which deserves a far more extended notice than we are able to bestow. *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* is a unique in literature—an original idea most successfully, if not agreeably, carried out. It is the autobiography of a man who is thoroughly heartless, selfish and depraved; low and brutal in his tastes, coarse and ruffianly in language, feelings and demeanor; to all appearance without a redeeming trait; yet who looks upon himself as a highly respectable, exemplary and much-injured character, and justifies all his own villainies with an earnestness, a sincerity and an unsuspecting good faith which would deceive the very elect. There has never been a novel in which the author is so completely identified—we beg pardon for using the phrase; we should rather say, so completely lost—in the hero. It is not Mr. Thackeray who speaks: it is Mr. Barry Lyndon; and Mr. Barry Lyndon pleads his own case as if he already had the jury on his side, and were certain of the sympathy and countenance of every honest man in the box. The talent for personation displayed is wonderful. Most of us have probably heard the story of Mr. Booth the elder, that it was a perilous task to play Richmond to his Richard, as he was apt to imagine that he was really the crook-backed tyrant, and to make genuine and frantic attempts to kill his antagonist, instead of quietly submitting to be killed himself at the proper moment. *Se non è vero, è ben trovato;* but it would seem as though Mr. Thackeray must have undergone some similar metamorphosis for the time being when he wrote *The Luck of Barry Lyndon.* That it is a pleasant book will not be maintained by many; yet the very repulsiveness of the subject carries the attention of the reader forward to the end. Those whose object is something higher than mere amusement, who are willing to seek for truth under the garb of fiction, will recognize the masterly exhibition of the force of self-love to pervert and destroy the moral sense; and may perhaps be not welcomely reminded of past occurrences, in which their own process of reasoning with regard to themselves bore a shadowy resemblance even to that of the detestable scoundrel, whom the most ardent believer in the total depravity of the races would scarcely consent to hail as a "man and a brother."

The Book of Snobs was the first of Mr. Thackeray's continuous productions which brought him very prominently before the public. It is the precursor of *Vanity Fair;* and bears somewhat the same relation to its antitype which a chart bears to a painting, or the "argument" of a poem to the poem itself. It was originally, as every one knows, a series of contributions to *Punch*, in the palmy days when *Punch* was as proudly eminent in its own sphere as the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly* in theirs. The interest of every reader must have been excited by the storm of merciless invective and ridicule which from week to week was poured upon all ranks and conditions of English society—the court, the aristocracy, the universities, the clergy, the army and navy, the rural gentry; even the very class of *littérateurs* to which Thackeray himself belonged—falling so indiscriminately and universally, in fact, as to convey the idea that the snobs of England and the population of England were convertible terms. The author makes no exception in his own case, but frankly avows him-

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self a snob, and as portraying habits and manners with which he is quite familiar —*et quorum pars ipse fuit.* The philosophy of the whole would seem to be that society was utterly corrupt, and that if honor, decency, manliness and principle had ever existed upon British soil, they must be numbered among things of the past. The volume grows wearisome by its sameness; and (at least in the humble judgment of the critic) the satire so far overshoots the mark as to lose very much of its effect. The skill of the artist is shown in the happy mingling of lights and shadows, and the true aim of the satirist is to render virtue more alluring by contrast with the ugliness of vice. Neither Horace, Juvenal nor Persius was blind to the many noble and heroic qualities of his countrymen, while showing no indulgence to their follies and crimes. *The Book of Snobs* is a kind of promiscuous slaughter of the innocent and the guilty: where all are condemned alike, the moral impression is the same as if all escaped.

We approach now the subject of *Vanity Fair*, Mr. Thackeray's acknowledged masterpiece, and the work on which, as we believe, his fame will chiefly rest with posterity. It is needless to recur to the sensation which it produced some twenty years since on both sides of the Atlantic. The author was not only enrolled at once among the foremost of living novelists, but by common consent even divided the crown of supremacy with Mr. Dickens, who had worn it undisturbed for so many years. To confirm the popular idea of the stupidity of those who sell books, and also the trials of the sons of genius who write them, it has been stated that the manuscript was offered in succession to three publishers, and declined. This may possibly be so, but we confess we have too good an opinion of the discernment of men in matters connected with their own business to suppose it probable. Mr. Thackeray, besides, was already sufficiently well known to ensure to a novel from his pen a favorable reception at the start. The foundation of the story may be, simply, that he was unable for some time to find a publisher with whom he could effect an arrangement which he regarded as satisfactory. The days when John Milton sold his *Paradise Lost* for ten pounds are long past and gone. We have no doubt that to the enlightened and liberal spirit of this very class of men, which is so much abused, are owing, in a far greater measure than most persons are aware of, the free expansion and development of intellectual power which characterize the present century.

The ingenious M. de Voltaire, who resembled Mr. Thackeray in not a few qualities of his mind, issued, at some epoch in his long career, a little romance called *Candide*, which has been classed by Lord Brougham and others as among the greatest of his multifarious efforts. We have, of course, no wish to palliate its scandalous blemishes, which were loudly denounced even at the time the book was written, and which, were it tenfold as brilliant, would exclude it from all decent society in our own day. We allude to it only in connection with its main design. It is leveled at the *optimist* philosophy—a species of absurdity which is concentred in the maxim of Pope, that "whatever is, is right," and which has extensively pervaded the teachings of the Deistical school in all ages. The doctrine is, not that all the evil which exists may be permitted by Providence for some wise purpose, and be ultimately overruled for good, but that the world as it is, with all its scenes of poverty, wretchedness, disease and death—with the ravages of war and the terrors of the pestilence—with the oppression of the poor and the triumph of guilt in high places—with the betrayal of innocence and the unblushing prosperity of the betrayer—with the corrupt nature of man, which in its worst manifestations could make a hell out of heaven,—that all this is just as it should be, and in perfect keeping with the sovereign will and pleasure of the Divine Being, to whose love and compassion for his children the heart instinctively turns in every moment of calamity or sorrow. "Everything is for

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the best in the best of all possible worlds," says Dr. Pangloss, after a series of misfortunes so horrible that the sarcastic tone of the narration makes the reader laugh and shudder in a breath. Voltaire has written much that is more pure, more agreeable, more entertaining than *Candide*, but he has written nothing of which the general aim and purport are more instructive, more searching or more true.

Vanity Fair may be styled the embodiment of the opposite principle—the *pessimist* view of life and its relations. Whatever is, is wrong; and if this is not the worst of all possible worlds, it is at least about as bad as it can be. Goodness is apparently a mere dream of poets: there is nothing but meanness, profligacy, vulgarity, selfishness and hypocrisy under the sun. The leprosy infects alike the high and the low; pentrates equally to the halls of fashion and the domestic fireside; pollutes with the same tainted breath the close air of the crowded city and the fresh breezes which blow over dale and down. No man is what he seems, or, rather, what he wishes to be considered. He is an impostor of some sort, and plays his part well or ill according to his ability to sustain the character. The book is a complete *bouleversement* of all the ideas which amiable and happy people entertain of the community around them. The conventional personages who figure on the stage of English society are "taken off" with an energy, a bitterness and an intense relish for the task which are on a par only with the consummate skill of the execution. The old country gentleman, the "hereditary legislator," who is so endlessly belauded in Parliament and out of it, proves to be an illiterate boor, who can scarcely spell his own name, and whose gross and brutal ignorance of all that is due to himself and his position throws Macaulay's rustic squires of Charles the Second's time into the shade. The polished scholar and diplomatist is a pompous prig, the shallowness of whose brain is equaled only by the depth of his conceit. The dignified clergyman has no other notion of the responsibilities of his sacred office than to grow fat upon his living, and makes it the main object of existence to cajole his rich relatives by way of securing a handsome remembrance at their death. The gallant young officer is the most empty-headed and heartless of coxcombs—brave only because he has not sense enough to be otherwise. His father, the honest British merchant of innumerable plays and novels, is the most grasping and avaricious of men of business, the most odious of tyrants in his own family, the most hectoring of bullies to those below him, and the most fawning of sycophants to his superiors. Everything in *Vanity Fair* must be described in superlatives, without regard to euphony of language. In this dreary catalogue, which might be extended to include almost every character in the book, we recognize but one unsightly picture of moral deformity after another; and the only difference is, that while some are positively frightful, others border more closely upon the grotesque. But nowhere is there an intimation that either man or woman is possessed of a soul, a conscience, an aspiration beyond this earth, or a capacity for a generous or noble feeling. The "*vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas*" at the end is not, like the utterance of the inspired writer, the sad reflection of age upon the waste of years in thoughtless indulgence, in the pursuit of sensual pleasure, in forgetfulness of the higher duties which man owes to his fellow-creatures and to God. It is the mocking commentary of the misanthrope upon a portraiture of themselves which his readers may condemn and denounce if they choose, but which he believes their secret hearts will tell them to be, in many respects at least, an "ower true tale."

Yet as Hope was found at the bottom of Pandora's box, as the darkest day seldom passes without some one incident to enliven it, so Mr. Thackeray has not left us wholly without a gleam of consolation in this deplorable world which we inhabit. There *is* a degree of virtue which human nature has the power to attain: it is possible to be a simpleton

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instead of a knave. Two persons fill a large space on the canvas, who, as they are happily married at the last, might pass for the hero and heroine, were we not expressly informed on the title-page that the novel is "without a hero." It would be painful to speak harshly of either; and it cannot be denied that there is much that is touching and beautiful in the recital of their joint histories, or that there might be, at least, if there were more in their characters to excite respect. But both are so excessively weak and foolish that the reader has almost a feeling of shame that he is interested in them at all. The poor Major, who even when he was a boy at school could never say no to another boy who wanted his top or his marbles, would in real life be the laughing-stock of all his acquaintances, however good-humored the laughter might be, for his utter want of sense and discrimination in choosing his friends, and his blind devotion to the most unworthy objects. His idolatry of a fellow like George Osborne, whose thorough puppyism and baseness of soul are transparent in his most trifling action and in every word which he speaks, would destroy the effect of all his good qualities in the minds of those who hold to the old adage that "a man is known by the company he keeps." Even his love for Amelia, generous and unselfish as it is to an almost superhuman degree, would lose much of its charm in the opinion of many by an unchivalrous notion that the most dignified figure conceivable is not that of a gentleman sighing for years at the feet of a lady who makes no secret that her affections are bound up in another. Amelia herself has shared the fate of most of Mr. Thackeray's female delineations—that of being anything but popular with her own sex. If women are the best judges of their own characters (and the subject is certainly one upon which the wisdom of man cometh to naught), then Mrs. Osborne is no less an exaggeration in her way than Sir Pitt Crawley in his. It is undoubtedly true that the depth of a woman's attachment is often just in proportion to the absurdity of her infatuation. It might be equally so that there has never yet been a man who was so great a fool that he could not find some woman to think him perfection. But these are exceptional instances. Women do not ordinarily love without a reason, any more than men; and neglect and indifference are as apt to turn love into aversion in the one case as in the other. It is strange that even such a mere babe in the affairs of the world should not have had an intuitive perception that her husband neither cared for her, nor was capable of caring for anybody but himself. The young lady in question is assuredly a type of a class which exists, but so far as she is held up for a pattern of what a woman should be, none but a professed misogynist can admire the picture, or regard it as otherwise than the most caustic satire of the most caustic book which the English language has produced.

But if Mr. Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* has neither attained nor desired the object of representing a good woman, he has succeeded beyond all peradventure and comparison in furnishing us with a bad one. The fame of Miss Rebecca Sharp is coequal and coextensive with that of her illustrious creator. She is the consummation of his genius, and may, for aught we know, assume something of the same proud eminence in fiction with Lucrezia Borgia or Catherine de Medicis in history. But while neither of these distinguished ladies surpasses her as an illustration of the maxim "*quid fœmina possit*," on the other hand we have not hitherto met with a chronicler who has contrived to render them comical or amusing personages. This Mr. Thackeray has accomplished in the case of Miss Becky with a skill peculiarly his own. Sycophant, false friend, intriguer, adulteress, probably murderess, as she is, she sets at least all the male part of the audience to laughing whenever she comes on the stage. Her entrance is the signal for a general brightening up, especially after a somewhat prolonged display of the sorrows of the sobbing and woe-begone Amelia.

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"She would beat the d—l, by Jove!" is (if we quote correctly from memory) the exclamation of Rawdon Crawley when she returns George Osborne's complimentary shake of one finger, and the forcible expression is likely to be re-echoed by the reader at every step in her progress. Even in her misfortunes we think of her as "poor Becky!" and find it difficult to remember how richly she has deserved them all and a thousand more. The appalling crime which is darkly hinted at in the last few pages of the novel no one will deny to be strictly in keeping with her character. She is not wantonly wicked: she would not poison a man who has been kind enough to her in his heavy, stupid, animal way, if there were no object to be gained by it. But Miss Rebecca Sharp is the universe to her; and Miss Rebecca Sharp's interests must be attended to, though the heavens may fall. If it pleased Divine Providence to create such a world and to put her into it, she is not responsible; and she is neither better nor worse than others. If there are good people here and there, they are too hopelessly silly for any feeling but contempt, or they are good only because they have not wit enough to be bad. The crowning scene of the whole work is the last, which describes the "horrible creature," as we believe she is usually styled by lady readers, as officiating in the capacity of saleswoman at a bazaar for the benefit of a Sunday-school or some pious and charitable purpose. The picture which accompanies it in the original edition may not be artistic or elegant, though it is by the author himself; but we can fancy the sardonic grin of the Mephistophelian exhibitor as he points the attention to the motto, "Virtue rewarded—a booth in Vanity Fair" —the appropriate termination and grand moral of the entire discourse.

To speak in panegyrical terms of the ability displayed in the book we have been discussing would be as needless as to maintain that Shakespeare is a great dramatist or Milton a great poet. No one doubts that the writer is a master of his subject, and has perfect command of the weapons which he wields. With regard to the degree of truth which it contains opinions may greatly vary. Mr. Colton has somewhere remarked in *Lacon* that we often abuse our own country or profession, but we never like to hear others do it; and the reason is, simply, that in such a case we tacitly make an exception in favor of ourselves which we are afraid that others may not. In the same manner we have met with persons who would extol *Vanity Fair* to the skies as a faithful exposé of the human heart and its corruptions, but who were strongly inclined, at least, to soften their tone when they found their listeners disposed to agree with them. That the world which it portrays is not the actual and real world in which we live is too obvious for dispute. Such a state of society could not exist for any length of time: its members (to use a very refined comparison), like the Kilkenny cats, would all "eat one another." It may be correct to say that selfishness is the first instinct of a child, but the lesson of mutual dependence is learned at a very early period. It is this mutual dependence which the Creator has wisely ordained as the connecting link between the highest and the lowest of his rational creatures—at once the evidence and the cause of the great brotherhood of the race. Even the wild Arab of the desert, whose hand is against every man and every man's hand against him, requires the sympathy of friends in trouble, their support in sickness, their consoling presence at the hour of death. Among any civilized people not a day can pass without innumerable instances of self-denying affection, of generous help to the unfortunate, of steady persistence in the right through obloquy and contempt, of manhood's arduous though unrequited toil in the sphere of duty, of woman's love, most steadfast and unwavering when the storms of calumny or adversity are fiercest. So far from its being true in any sense that human nature is rotten at the core, all history proves that while there is no depth of depravity to which it may not descend, there is also no sublimity of moral heroism to which it

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is not capable of rising. In the details of every-day life, however much there may be to distract the mind of the speculative philosopher upon the ways and designs of Providence, yet the calm tide of domestic happiness flows on: there are health and cheerfulness and active industry; there are the kind greetings of acquaintances abroad and the sweet associations which cluster around the name of home; the landscape is full of beauty; the earth teems with animal enjoyment in its myriad forms; "man goeth forth to his work and to his labor until the evening." It is easy to be for ever railing at a world of which we ourselves are an integral part; but it is apt to be either the token of an irritating vanity which amounts to a disease, or a salve to the conscience of one who knows himself to be utterly false and hollow, and lays the flattering unction to his soul that men only differ from each other in the extent and adroitness of their powers of hypocrisy.

That Mr. Thackeray, in the composition of his greatest work, was impelled by any such motives as those last alluded to would be an inference as unfair as it is inconsistent with all that we know of his character. The main object in writing a novel, as in writing any other book, is success; and success is never so complete as when the public is pretty thoroughly startled. There is a story related of Rabelais, that when he was asked how he, a clergyman, could shock the sensibilities of all pious people by so profane and scandalous a production as *Gargantua*, he answered that he had already employed his talents upon a most creditable theological treatise of which nobody took any notice. *Vanity Fair* is certainly not profane or scandalous, nor does its general tone vary materially from that of the author's previous efforts; yet Mr. Thackeray might have urged, with some similitude, that as the results of his exertions to amuse and enlighten mankind had not hitherto been quite commensurate with his labor, he was determined to come out with something that *should* be read, and that *should* tell upon the minds of the community, whether the impression it produced were favorable or not.

At all events, in *Vanity Fair* Mr. Thackeray makes his final bow to his vast audience in the rôle of Diogenes. His object was accomplished: his genius was everywhere recognized, and his fame established. He could now afford to be on good terms with society, which had thus far failed to appreciate his powers, owing principally to the fact that he had not been able to do them justice himself. In his subsequent novels the repellant cynicism of the earlier part of his career fades gradually away, breaks out in a flash here and there, and at length entirely disappears. Every reader must be struck with the marked change in this respect from *Vanity Fair* to *Pendennis*. There is quite enough in the latter to remind us of the former, but the whole spirit of the two books is different. *Lasciate ogni speranza* might well be inscribed over the portals of the Inferno we have just quitted: in the chequered scene which now opens before us we discover at least some measure of faith in humanity, and a purpose worthy of the toils of a gifted intellect. We emerge from darkness into day, even if the sky be far from cloudless and the general prospect by no means so enlivening as might be wished.

Pendennis, as a work of art, is formed upon the model of *Tom Jones;* to which, it may be remarked in passing, it bears another unfortunate resemblance — we mean in its length. This is a practice of the last century, which it is to be regretted the "serial" system has revived in the present. *Pendennis* occupies two goodly octavos of nearly four hundred pages each, in close type. There have been very fair histories of England, or histories of the world indeed, which were shorter. Where a novel is published in numbers, its extension upon this Procrustean bed may render it more profitable to the author, but it is bad policy with reference to its permanent popularity. *Clarissa Harlowe* and *Sir Charles Grandison* slumber peacefully on the shelves of old-fashioned libraries: *The Vicar of Wakefield*, which, though

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in a very different style, is not superior in substantial merit to either, can be obtained in modern freshness and gilding at any village bookstore.

Yet, however sore a trial it may be to human patience to read *Pendennis* continuously, every one must perceive the happy and successful imitation in the respect alluded to. The unities of this species of fictitious composition are preserved throughout: the most trifling incident has its place and importance as bearing, directly or indirectly, upon the fortunes of the hero. Considering the immense quantity of "padding" which a serial of this length necessarily requires, it is surprising how well the author has kept his main object in view from first to last. Whether the young gentleman in question is worthy of this painstaking fidelity and unwearied industry on the part of his biographer is a point which readers must decide for themselves, although we believe he is not usually a favorite, even among Mr. Thackeray's greatest admirers. We confess, however, that we are disposed to have a better opinion of him than a mere superficial glance at his character might suggest. Assuredly he would not be a fascinating personage to meet. His talents and intellectual calibre are not of a sufficiently high order to excite any peculiar interest, or to atone for his insufferable flippancy, dandyism and conceit, his absurd blasé airs at twenty-five, and his making it his chief ambition to be a hanger-on in fashionable society when he is really capable of much better things. His willingness, for the sake of money and position, to marry a girl who is so much like himself that he thoroughly knows and despises her, and to enter on public life with no principles whatever, except to be true to his party for the time being,—these facts, although perhaps not unprecedented on this side of the Atlantic or the other, are decidedly such as to leave a very unpleasant impression of Mr. Arthur Pendennis. But it must be taken into the account that he has been utterly spoiled from infancy, and that he has had the worst of all possible Mentors. With all deference to the memory of the pious and gentle Helen, it cannot be denied that she unwittingly plays into the hands of her venerable relative, even though it may seem almost sacrilege to name them together. If a boy who has been accustomed to govern his mother from the time when he was old enough to walk, and who has a battered old London roué for his guide, philosopher and friend, comes to any good at all, it would be equally unwise and ungrateful to look the gift horse in the mouth. Pendennis is at least an affectionate son and a kind brother; after his escapade at college he is honest in pecuniary matters; he labors manfully for his own support: above all, he is morally pure—there is not an intimation to the contrary in either of the long volumes. The episode of Fanny Bolton exhibits him in a light which is not only praiseworthy, but noble, considering the ideas which young Englishmen of his rank are too apt to entertain upon these subjects. There is something to redeem a thousand faults in the spectacle of a young man who, from innate abhorrence of the crime, flings off with a shudder the temptation most fatally natural to his age and condition, his yielding to which would be laughed at as a jest by one-half of his acquaintances, and produce only a shrug and a wink from the gray-haired reprobate who is responsible for the bulk of his follies. His conversion from his more besetting sins at the close may appear somewhat sudden; and we are not often treated, either in real life or in fiction, with the picture of a young gentleman returning happy and triumphant, apparently without a feeling of mortification or resentment, to inform his old love that he has been jilted by his present one, and that he is now ready to take *her* as soon as may be agreeable. We fear that very few readers will relish his union with Laura in such circumstances; and there may be some who are uncharitable enough to regret that the match with Miss Amory was broken off. But those who estimate him fairly, and with due allowance for youth, inexperience and surrounding influences, will hope for

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much from the devotion of a woman whose only fault is a want of judgment on one single point, and will wish him well, even though they might be able to bear their lot with resignation if they should not often encounter him again.

Be this as it may, we are under one obligation to Mr. Pendennis, for which we can afford to overlook a vast deal that might be otherwise objectionable. It is by his means that we become acquainted with his friend Warrington. The latter is the true hero of the tale, so far as the word hero implies the possession of any qualities that can be termed heroic. For once, Mr. Thackeray has presented us with a *man*—with a character which we can really admire and respect, and in whose history we can take some genuine interest. He is not indeed a complete model for imitation. There is no reason why he should wear ragged shirts; or drink beer out of quart pots at breakfast-time; or why he should affect the Bohemian so much as he does; or why he should be quite so "slashing" and "savage" in the style of his editorial labors, as though it were perfectly lawful to indulge in insolences in print which would subject the critic to being knocked down out of hand if he ventured upon them elsewhere. But these are faults upon the surface; and the last, in particular, arises more from his honest and hearty dislike to cant and humbug than from any evil intention. The groundwork of the character is that of a thorough and chivalrous gentleman. He is the most faithful of friends and counselors, the soul of honor in all his dealings with others, and where women are concerned even Chaucer's very perfect gentle knight might yield to him the palm in refinement and delicacy of feeling. The terrible results of early thoughtlessness, the hopeless cloud of misfortune which hangs over him, which weighs down his noble spirit, which represses the promptings of ambition and makes a virtuous love impossible,—even these have not power to blight his energies, to corrupt his manly nature, or to make him forget that he has still a purpose in living, a work to be accomplished in a world which can yield no real happiness to him. Mr. Thackeray is too much of an artist to resort to the bungling expedient of removing obnoxious or inconvenient persons by the summary process of decapitation at the proper moment. Besides, the marriage of Arthur and Laura is predestinated, as every one knows, from the very foundation of the chronicle. Yet it must be a dull reader indeed who can lay down the book without a pretty strong sense of chagrin and disappointment that this should be so. No description can be needed to bring before us, in their full intensity of suffering, the stifled emotions which weaken the voice and agitate the powerful frame of the narrator as he reveals the existence of the coarse termagant who still has the legal right to claim him as her husband; at once confessing the shame and folly of his youth, casting a deep shadow over the sweet face which looks upon him while he speaks, and destroying for ever the vision of happiness which had begun to dawn upon the frank, generous, loving heart which could have clung to his own with childlike faith and confidence through the worst trial that might beset their earthly lives. Mr. Warrington is by no means the "portrait of a gentleman" which would show to advantage at the annual exhibition of a gallery of paintings. He would not find favor in the sight of most young ladies at boarding-schools; and in private theatricals or as a partner in the German he would be deplorably out of place. But in all the essential elements which constitute true dignity and worth he has no superior. Wedded to a woman like Laura, his uncouthness and misanthropy and eccentricity would disappear with the bitter recollections of the past; he would assume his proper station in the great battle of the world; and the visitors to this fable-land of Mr. Thackeray's might return with a feeling of satisfaction very different from that produced by the actual, even though it be the unavoidable, conclusion of the novel.

We have encroached so largely upon our space in these criticisms, imperfect

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and desultory and partial as they are, that the remainder of our task must be performed in a manner which will perhaps be more acceptable to our readers than it can prove in any way commensurate with the subject. Our comments upon *Henry Esmond* and *The Newcomes* must be as far from doing justice to either as a card photograph from conveying an idea of a varied and extensive landscape. The plot of the former has met with such severe and general disapproval that it would be superfluous to remark upon it at length. With whatever grace and beauty the story may be told, nothing can compensate for the shock to all natural feeling in the union of a lady of mature years and a young man whom she has not only regarded and treated as a son from his childhood, but who has made her the confidant of his love-affairs, and wearied out her patience a thousand times with the ravings of his delirious passion for her own daughter! The picture is not a pleasant one to contemplate or to dwell upon longer than is necessary. But as a historical novel the merits of *Henry Esmond* are undoubtedly of the highest order. It might be read as a companion (and perhaps also in some slight degree as a corrective) of Macaulay's article on Addison, and a supplement to his account of Marlborough and his campaigns. The graphic fidelity which portrays the lives of wits, men of letters and cabinet statesmen at home, is fully equaled by the rapidity, spirit and vigor of the description of military movements abroad, and the scathing eloquence employed upon barbarisms in war, which of course have no parallel in our own day. The charm of the work is in the style, which combines all the ease, copiousness and elegance of Mr. Thackeray's ordinary diction with a flavor of the period, just sufficient to give an air, not of affectation, but of reality, to the narrative, and to impart to it a quaintness which reminds us of good wine mellowed by age. Where the author chooses to allow full play to his powers in this respect the illusion is almost as complete as it is delightful. No one would attribute to Mr. Addison the paper which purports to be from the *Spectator* in the second volume, but we can scarcely persuade ourselves that his dear friend and crony, "wild Dick," had not volunteered to write it, in the kindness of his heart, for his lovesick young acquaintance. It is a fortunate circumstance that the supply of this peculiar species of talent is apt to fall short of the demand. If all those who (as is harshly alleged by heretics) employ their time in framing communications from the spirit-world possessed Mr. Thackeray's genius for imitation, we should be inclined to tremble for orthodoxy.

In *The Newcomes*, Mr. Thackeray seems, like many serialists, to have begun with no very definite purpose, and to have written somewhat at random for several numbers, until he chanced to strike upon a vein which he has followed to the end. The fortunes of Clive and Ethel form the main interest of the story; although, as frequently occurs, there is much more skill displayed in the conception and grouping of the subordinate than of the principal figures. Those, indeed, who are fond of studying enigmas will find an exhaustless subject in Miss Ethel, who appears to have been designed upon the theory that because a woman is a bundle of contradictions, therefore any bundle of contradictions is a woman. This may be stating the point too strongly, but surely the true province of art in fiction is to show that the basis of the character is the same throughout, in spite of all apparent discrepancies. The Protean changes which the young lady undergoes from chapter to chapter are so incomprehensible and fatiguing that it is a welcome relief when she is comfortably disposed of, for the time being at least, as a sort of Protestant Sister of Mercy, having quite given up the world, which no one can blame her for doing if the world is what Mr. Thackeray represents it. But not all her subsequent labors of faith and charity can atone for her treatment of her cousin, or for the degradation involved in her acceptance of Lord Farintosh. If the noble marquis had any

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qualities whatever to recommend him, the case might be different; but he is an absolute fool, and no one knows it better than Ethel herself. She does not profess one particle of regard, to say nothing of affection, for her future husband; and yet, for the sake of wealth and a title, she is willing to go through life with the awkward booby tied to her apron-strings, and to expose herself to a degree of mortification and wretchedness which it is scarcely credible that such a girl as she is described to be could consent to encounter. Mr. Clive is merely another illustration of Mr. Thackeray's favorite idea, that the worst slavery on earth is that of love, inasmuch as it is the only species, so far as we know, which implies, of necessity, the loss of all dignity and self-respect. No doubt great allowance should be made for a youth in his forlorn condition, but we have heard of equally virulent cases of the same malady, where the victims nevertheless were not quite ready to surpass Sir Walter Raleigh by throwing down themselves, instead of their cloaks, for their goddesses to tread upon. Apart from these objections, however, there are few novels in the English language which contain so much that is fascinating and brilliant as *The Newcomes*. Fred Bayham, Charles Honeyman, the inimitable Vicomte de Florac, and a host of others, are all in the author's best style, which is the highest praise that can be awarded them. Colonel Newcome may be somewhat monotonous at times, but his deathbed is a scene to be remembered long years after the first impressions have passed, and to draw tears from the eyes of young and old, as all alike recognize the power of innate purity, gentleness and truth to disarm the last hour of its terrors, and cause the soul, broken and weary with the storms of fate, to stand, not altogether fearless, but humble, hopeful and trusting, in the presence of the Master!

From the publication of this work may be dated the decline of Mr. Thackeray's pre-eminent genius as a novelist. The *Virginians* and its successors bear tokens of no ordinary talent, and are marked by a mildness and benignity of tone which are in pleasing contrast with the asperities of his more youthful days. But they have not the genuine life, force and spirit, the foam and sparkle, of *Vanity Fair* or *Pendennis*. They have been widely popular, and (perhaps a little on the principle that unto him who hath shall be given) they have received unlimited praise from reviewers. Yet we may be permitted to doubt whether some of them, at least, would have passed so easily and prosperously through the trying ordeal of modern English criticism if they had not been protected by the shadow of a great name.

The facetious Sydney Smith is reported to have said, on one occasion, that he made it a rule never to read a book before reviewing it, as it *prejudiced his mind so*. The story is not probably true, inasmuch as the few books which that distinguished luminary of the Church did review, he not only evidently had read, but to some purpose. Yet as a landscape can only be seen to advantage from some neighboring eminence, so the philosophy of an author's writings can be better learned from the general impression which they produce as a whole than from their close examination in detail. No one can claim that Mr. Thackeray caters to please the palate, to amuse the fancy or gratify the self-love of his readers. No one ever laid aside a volume of his with a sigh of regret that fiction and fact were so different. There are many books in this department of literature which become like old friends, of whom we never grow weary, and whose companionship is an unfailing resource from the ennui and vexations and troubles of our every-day experience. Numbers of persons will assert that they can *always* read Scott or Dickens, or a host of others who might be named; but it is rarely that such an observation is heard with reference to Mr. Thackeray. Whether he be regarded as a great moral teacher, or as a professed scoffer at the existence of morality at all, or as simply a writer of great power, but of a perverse and morbid taste, the fact remains the same that

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the eager curiosity which such powers excite is apt to be contented with a single perusal. His characters are not such as we love to linger upon—his pictures of life not of a kind to render the imaginary world more attractive than the real. We may be both sadder and wiser (in one sense) from our acquaintance with his brilliant pages, but not better, purer or happier in the end. Yet it is pleasant to reflect that any strictures which may have been freely indulged in in this paper apply solely to the author, and not to the man. Those who enjoyed the great privilege of seeing and hearing him as a public lecturer, some years since, will not speedily forget the charm of his manner, his winning and persuasive voice, or the thorough conviction which he left upon the minds of his audience that they had been in the company of a *gentleman*. And so far as we may be guided by the universal tone of the English press, we cannot go far wrong in paying the tribute of our deep respect to the memory of the generous patron and encourager of younger brothers in the same arduous path in which he himself had toiled, the frank and genial companion, the kind father, and the warm-hearted, sincere and sympathizing friend.

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